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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 KUALA LUMPUR 000232

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KISL](#) [MY](#)
SUBJECT: NON-MUSLIM LEADERS VOICE CONCERN OVER ISLAMIZATION
IN MALAYSIA

REF: A. 06 KUALA LUMPUR 2167

[1](#)B. 06 KUALA LUMPUR 1516

Classified By: Ambassador Christopher J. LaFleur for
reasons 1.4 (b and d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Eight senior non-Muslim religious leaders grouped under the Malaysian Consultative Council of Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Sikhs and Taoists (MCCBCHST) expressed their individual and collective concerns about the state of religious freedom and civil rights for non-Muslims in Malaysia during a January 23 luncheon hosted by the Ambassador. The respective spokesmen for the five religious constituencies under MCCBCHST - the country's most influential non-Muslim NGO concerned with religious issues - described an increasing Islamization of society, government and the court system. They cited specific examples of discrimination against non-Muslims, bemoaned the deterioration in the quantity, quality and tone of dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims at all levels of society in recent years, and criticized Muslim religious and political leaders for their unwillingness to engage in substantive dialogues with non-Muslims about religion-related issues. While the MCCBCHST presented familiar criticisms about discrimination against non-Muslims in Malaysia, in response to our questions the group's leaders could not articulate their specific near-term tactics and planned activities. The group's approach toward addressing religious freedom concerns remains ad hoc, unorganized and still largely reactive. End Summary.

MCCBCHST Background

[1](#)2. (C) The MCCBCHST was founded in 1983 in order to represent the religious interests of non-Muslims in Malaysia. The MCCBCHST subsequently grew to become Malaysia's largest non-Muslim organization concerned with religious freedom and interfaith cooperation. The Malaysian Government views the council as an intermediary for policy issues affecting the country's non-Muslims, who constitute some 45 percent of the population. In one of their more publicly visible efforts in recent years, component bodies of the MCCBCHST were key participants in a 2005 initiative to establish an Interfaith Commission of Malaysia; the initiative was rejected by Prime Minister Abdullah. While the group has historically assumed a low key posture, preferring a cooperative rather confrontational approach to the government and Muslim NGOs on religious matters, the MCCBCHST has tentatively begun to criticize those government officials, secular court magistrates and Muslim activists who seek an even greater

role for Islam (at the perceived expense of non-Muslims) in politics, education, the justice system and civil society.

Government Preferences for Malay Muslim Majority

13. (C) The MCCBCHST leaders lamented that government employees (including police and military personnel) have become "90 percent" ethnic Malay Muslims, although they account for only about 55% of the country's population. Sikh leader Jagir Singh told the Ambassador of a recent police recruiting drive in the state of Perak to select approximately 250 new recruits. Of the hundreds of ethnic Indian and ethnic Chinese applicants, only two ethnic Chinese citizens were reportedly selected, with the remaining positions going to ethnic Malays. Singh also complained of a dearth of government scholarships for highly qualified non-Malay students to study abroad, compared with the "hundreds of scholarships given to less qualified Malay Muslim students." MCCBCHST's President, Chee Peck Kiat, said applications for construction of mosques are quickly approved, along with allocations of government funds to subsidize their construction, while Christian churches and Buddhist and Hindu temples receive no taxpayer support and often require ten or more years of government processing time. Chee said Buddhists finally received approval on January 19 to construct the country's newest temple in a Kuala Lumpur suburb, following 11 years of "constantly pushing the government."

Inter-Faith Cooperation and Dialogue Declining

14. (C) Chee said the trend toward Islamization and Malay Muslim dominance of the country's centers of official power

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were accelerated by former PM Mahathir's declaration on September 29, 2001 that Malaysia is an "Islamic state." Chee heavily criticized Mahathir's statement as being "beyond constitutional boundaries" and "encouraging a sense of superiority among Muslim leaders." He said a sense of Islam's superiority pervades the attitudes of Muslim NGO leaders, and that this also clearly manifested itself in November 2006 at the latest general assembly of UMNO, the country's dominant political party that largely represents Malay Muslims (ref A). Following the UMNO assembly, the MCCBCHST issued a press release that stated, "Although we appreciate the Prime Minister's sentiments in his final speech when he called for tolerance and mutual respect, the comments from the other ministers, leaders and delegates were oppressive, deeply disturbing and manifest a lack of tolerance and respect for non-Muslims."

15. (C) MCCBCHST Executive Council member Pardip Kumar Kukreja, a businessman representing Hindus, said the government is engaged in "an intelligent, deliberate and methodical operation of ethnic cleansing against non-Muslims." While his fellow religious leaders did not echo those sentiments, all agreed that the diplomatic community in Kuala Lumpur should not publicly refer to Malaysia as a tolerant Muslim country. They criticized the public comments by British Deputy PM John Prescott during his October 2006 visit to KL; he called Malaysia a "model for inter-religious dialogue." Chee thought these "misperceptions" arose in large part from the government's control over the country's mainstream media. Commenting about media coverage of MCCBCHST's positions on religious issues, Chee said, "Our views are either distorted or not published. We have difficulties being heard."

16. (C) The Ambassador noted the strong U.S. interest in religious freedom around the world, our encouragement of dialogue to resolve inter-religious tensions, and our increased engagement with the Islamic community. He noted that Malaysians themselves would need to continue to

carefully manage their inter-ethnic and inter-religious relations, as they have done with relative success since the 1969 race riots. We provided the MCCBCHST leaders with copies of the 2006 U.S. International Religious Freedom Report.

COMMENT

17. (C) As virtually all ethnic Malays are Muslims, religious disputes between Muslims and non-Muslims invariably assume a strong racial dimension. PM Abdullah has permitted the media wider latitude in reporting on these issues since he assumed office two years ago, but the wider coverage has only served to highlight the widening societal fault line between Muslims and non-Muslims in Malaysia. These tensions had their roots in the origins of the country a half century ago, but they have been exacerbated over the years by trends which include the massive government affirmative action programs for the Malays, the rapid growth in the Malay population and the decline in the Chinese, and the voluntary segregation of the races in their separate school systems. Moreover, non-Muslims are represented by ethnic Indian and ethnic Chinese political parties thoroughly dominated by UMNO within the governing coalition. As tensions peaked last November following the UMNO convention, the PM started cautioning any media and others not to inflame racial and religious passions (ref B).

18. (C) These significant challenges call for decisive and creative leadership on behalf of the country's non-Muslim religious leaders. However, while the MCCBCHST presented familiar criticisms about discrimination against non-Muslims in Malaysia, in response to our questions the group's leaders could not articulate their specific near-term tactics and planned activities. The group's approach toward addressing religious freedom concerns remains ad hoc, unorganized and still largely reactive. Their only substantive proposal at this event was that the USG implicitly threaten to limit bilateral economic cooperation if the GOM was not more responsive to their concerns, a tactic likely to be counter-productive with a country famously hypersensitive about sovereignty. In our estimation, they are more likely to make headway by allying themselves with more progressive groups in the Malay community, many of which share their disquiet over the trend of the past two decades here toward increasingly conservative interpretations of Islam and visible expansion of Islam's role in what had once been a more secular government. However, this luncheon suggested that at this point the MCCBCHST lacks leadership with the

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political acumen to advance its agenda.
LAFLEUR